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Speaking Truth in Love: Strategies for Prophetic Preaching

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For many preachers—including myself—prophetic preaching is the most difficult kind of preaching we do. I know that when I first graduated from seminary twenty-seven years ago and went out to serve as co-pastor, with my husband, for four small churches in rural Virginia, I equated prophetic preaching with head-on, confrontational preaching. I thought that unless I was making people angry through an occasional prophetic sermon, I probably wasn't doing my job well.

My role models for preaching then were the minor prophets, people like Amos and Micah and Hosea, who called the people of Israel to accountability before God in no uncertain terms, and who sometimes even referred to their hearers by such uncomplimentary terms as “you cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1).

It wasn't until I had been in ministry for awhile that I realized that the minor prophets might not always be the best models for parish ministry, since ordinarily they were not also serving as pastors or priests for their people at the same time. It is not easy to be prophet and priest, a gadfly and a comforter. We are dealing with a complex calling here, and one in which the local pastor frequently feels torn between what seem like conflicting roles in ministry.

Yet the more I read the sermons of contemporary prophets, such as Barbara Lundblad, James Forbes, and William Sloane Coffin, Jr., the more I also realize how desperately we need more preachers like them. The church today seems to have developed a severe case of prophetic laryngitis¹ in the public arena, and our witness is suffering because of it. Furthermore, theologically we need the prophets because ultimately their message brings hope—hope of a new day to come when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

My own preferred working definition of prophetic preaching comes from Walter Brueggemann's now classic book, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Brueggemann writes, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”² For Brueggemann such countercultural witness will necessarily involve criticizing the old order, and sometimes even pronouncing a death sentence upon it—which is why prophetic witness can be so difficult. But Brueggemann also reminds us that while the first task of the Biblical prophets was to criticize the old order, their second task was to energize their hearers with a hope-filled vision of the new reign of God that was to come. “The riddle and insight of biblical faith,” he writes, “is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings.”³

In this article I will identify seven strategies for approaching the task of prophetic preaching with wisdom, pastoral sensitivity, and love. Yet when talking about strategies, it is also important to remember that our goal is not to make the Gospel more palatable. It is to make it more hearable. And that is a very different thing. The distinction Paul Tillich makes between “genuine” and “wrong” stumbling blocks in his book *Theology of Culture* is helpful in this regard.⁴

Genuine stumbling blocks, says Tillich, are those theological affirmations that are at the heart of the Gospel itself—those offenses that we dare not remove or else we have robbed preaching of its very heart and soul. Offenses like a crucified messiah, a gospel that will “lift up the poor and send the rich empty away,” or the radical call of Jesus to love and forgive our enemies. Helping people get beyond genuine stumbling blocks is not our work, says Tillich. It is God's work.

“Wrong” stumbling blocks, on the other hand, are those things we preachers may do—either intentionally or unintentionally in our communication of Gospel—that keep our congregations from giving the Gospel we preach a fair hearing. Things like our arrogance or aloofness in the pulpit, the use of illustrations that belittle or put someone down, or our failure to use inclusive language. Wrong stumbling blocks are something we can and should do something about.

To that end, I would like to suggest seven strategies that we preachers might employ to occasion a genuine hearing of God's prophetic Gospel, so that people can decide for it or against it.

The importance of trust and speaking prophetic truth in love

In his book *Speaking Truth in Love*, Philip Wogaman tells about Ernest Freemont Tittle, one of the great prophetic preachers of the mid-twentieth century, who held a number of fairly radical views that were not broadly shared by his congregation at First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois. At one juncture in Tittle's ministry a serious move was mounted by some members of the congregation to have him removed from the pulpit. But the tide, Wogaman says, was stemmed when a leading layman in the congregation—widely known for his conservatism—put a stop to the idea with a moving speech about how Dr. Tittle had stayed up all night with the layman's dying wife.⁵

Wogaman continues: “If the whole point of the prophetic word is God's love, how on earth can that message be heard if it is not expressed in a context of love? ... We cannot preach about love un-lovingly; it is a self-contradiction.”⁶

If prophetic preaching is born out of thinly disguised anger at a congregation, out of frustration with a congregation, or out of a desire to appear loving so that the message will be heard and accepted, people will know it. We can't fake love in the pulpit.

If the message we bring is genuinely born out of love—a love regularly practiced for even for the most recalcitrant of sinners—hearts may well be opened to the prophetic message of the Gospel in ways we cannot even begin to imagine or anticipate. And, as Wogaman rightly notes, this is at heart not a practical matter, but a theological one, issuing from the way in which God deals with us.

Starting with the Familiar and the Comfortable, and Moving Toward the Unfamiliar and Stretching

James Forbes, the current pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, makes an interesting progression as he moves from the more familiar to the less familiar with his own congregation in the following sermon:

Years ago, when I was still living in North Carolina, someone said to me, ‘Brother Forbes, do you think the gospel can be preached by someone who is not Pentecostal?’ Well, I wasn’t sure, for it was the only preaching I had known, but I imagined that it could happen even if I hadn’t seen or heard it. Indeed, I found out some time later that it was so.

After I had moved away from my hometown, someone said to me, “Rev. Forbes, have you ever heard the true gospel from a white preacher?” Well, in theory I knew it had to be true for God doesn’t withhold the Spirit from anyone. Though I had my doubts that a white preacher could speak with power, I came to a point in my life where I had to say,

“Yes, I’ve heard it!”

Some time went by, and people began to press upon me the question of the ordination of women. “Could the gospel be preached by a woman even though the holy scriptures led a woman to keep silence in the church?”

I had to ponder this, for it went against what I had known in my own church and there was much resistance from my brother clergy. But I listened to my sisters and before too long I knew the Spirit of God was calling them to preach. Who was I to get in God’s way?

Now I thought I had been asked the last question about who might be called to bring me the word of the Lord. But I found out I was wrong. A new question has been posed to me, and many of you know what it is. “Can gay men and lesbian women be called to preach the word of God?” Oh, I know what the Bible says and I know what my own uneasiness says and I can see that same uneasiness in some of our faces. But I’ve been wrong before, and the Spirit has been nudging me to get over my uneasiness. Some- times we forget Jesus’ promise—that the Spirit will lead us into all truth. Well, that must have meant the disciples didn’t know it all then, and maybe we don’t know it all now.⁷

By starting with the familiar and comfortable, and then pressing toward the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable, we can allow people the time and the space to have their horizons stretched from the inside out. And in the process, we can also establish points of identification with them that strengthen the bonds between pastor and people—even while prophetic words are being spoken.

Using a Congregation’s Own History as a Bridge for Forging the Way Toward a New Future Prophetic Vision for Its Future

One of the stories I tell in my book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* is about Tom Hay, a seminary classmate of mine who was at one time the pastor of a small church in a very conservative community in eastern North Carolina that was seriously divided by race. One week—during which the Gospel lectionary text was focused on the story of the Syrophonecian woman and how (as some commentators suggest) she pressed Jesus to expand the community of his ministry to include even her, a Gentile—Tom decided to use his sermon to address the issue of race.

He began by recounting the story of “Stone Soup”—a story in which, during a time of famine after war, the members of a community gradually come together and, by contributing the vegetables that each had stashed away to a large community pot that had water in it and a magic stone, ultimately made enough soup to feed not only themselves, but also the strangers who passed through their town. He went on in his sermon to affirm the congregation for their own past history as stone soup makers, as he told the story of how one snowy January theirs was the only church in the community that stayed open for worship and how, as they went out to the highways and byways to bring people to church in their pick-up trucks, they ended up having such a large congregation that they had to break more bread and pour more wine for their communion time.

And then he went on to tell them—in both an encouraging and a challenging way—that while they had become very proficient in making stone soup, enough to feed many people, they still had some growing to do in the area of sharing their soup with strangers. And that a part of God’s vision for their future was that they would become more open to those in their own community who, due to the divides of race, had become virtual strangers to them. He challenged them to do their part in breaking down the dividing walls of hostility so that all could sit together and eat together at the same table.

That sermon caught fire in that congregation— so much fire that they later named their homecoming and outreach Sunday “Stone Soup Sunday” and had mugs made with that slogan on them.

Standing With the Congregation Under the Word of God, Rather than Opposite the Congregation Armed With the Word of God

Walter Brueggeman draws what has proved for me a very helpful and insightful analogy between preaching and family systems theory. He says that in most church situations of biblical interpretation three voices are operative: that of the biblical text, of the pastor, and of the congregation. Yet all too often pastors team up with texts to “triangle” against their congregations in preaching, leaving the congregation “a hostile, resistant outsider.” How much better, contends Brueggemann, if the pastor stand with the congregation against the text, letting the radical Word of God offend both!⁸

One of my first years on the faculty of Princeton Seminary I heard Brian Blount—my dear friend and NT colleague, who is also a very fine prophetic preacher—preach a sermon entitled “Stay Close” to graduating seniors. The sermon—based on the story in Mark 9 (14-29) where Jesus heals a demon- possessed boy and then challenges the disciples to pray harder so that they, too, can cast out such demons—is a strong challenge to seminarians to stay close to God through prayer so that they, too, can be empowered by God to cast out the many demons of injustice they will face in their ministries.

By the sermon’s end, we find these very honest and self revealing words, spoken by the preacher. Listen to how Blount, by his own honest identification with the fears of these budding pastors, also enhances the power and authenticity of his proclamation.

But before I close I must come clean myself. You know, when I first heard about this invitation, my first inclination was to turn it down. Not because I'm not honored that you would ask me to preach at such an important occasion (which I am), but because I was a little afraid. Not of preaching, but of preaching in this academic context. I never preached in this chapel while I was a student, and when I returned, I honestly intended not to preach here as a professor. When I was a student it was because it always felt more like an academic exercise than a spiritual one because I felt, even then, that I was being graded. Now it's because I remember how my sermons in my community in Virginia sometimes got me into trouble, and junior professors already have all the trouble they can handle just by being junior professors. I worry about that kind of stuff all the time, it seems now. About how people perceive me. About whether I'm doing too much. Saying too much. About how far I have the resources to push myself beyond the confines of this sheltered seminary existence to work where I ought to be working in the world around it...

Believe me, there will come a time when you start to worry in the same way. Worry about offending parishioners, threatening the budget, offending powerful people on the session, in the presbytery, on the deacon's board, in the bishop's office, in the mayor's office, on the school board, on the chamber of commerce, in the Princeton Theological Seminary community, and you start to think, you know, "I've got a family. I want to have friends. I want people to like me. I want to keep my job or secure it for a long time." So you start to think, "Maybe I ought to do Christianity, do faith the way Brian Blount plays basketball, with- out risk, without doing anything that might push me to the point of no return." I'm here tonight, though, because I want to tell you, and remind myself, if that's what you've graduated to do, then maybe your presbytery can use you, maybe your bishop can use you, maybe your church can use you.

But I'm not so sure God can use you.

Appears to me, by then you're pretty much all used up. God needs soldiers, not used-up followers. God needs players who can give God twenty points every night. That's what finally came to me as I meditated on the decision to worship with you this evening. I thought about my father struggling and believing, I thought about those slaves singing and believing. In cotton fields, in cornfields, in tobacco fields, in fields of misery and hopelessness, and yet they sang the Lord's song in a foreign land. They stayed close to God, and that gave them faith and the faith gave them power.⁹

By taking his stand with the congregation under the Word of God, and by openly acknowledging the ways in which that Word also convicts him, Blount is able to speak some challenging words in a hear- able way.

Articulating the Opposing View Point in a Sermon in a Manner that Is Fair and Accurate and Believable

If we are going to tackle the position of someone who disagrees with us in a sermon, it is often very important that we state their position as fairly and as accurately as we can. Otherwise, we can easily raise the ire and the defenses of people who feel that we've diminished or misrepresented their points of view in our preaching.

In his book *Preaching Christian Doctrine*, William J. Carl shares these insights about how William Sloane Coffin, Jr., prepared for preaching. He writes:

Coffin does not avoid the "emotionally explosive"; he ignites it.

But he never does so foolishly or dogmatically. The reason is that he knows what he is talking about. Not everyone will agree with Coffin's conclusions on issues, but no one questions his knowledge of the problem.

Coffin always does his homework. He sets aside time and reads articles and books—whatever he can get his hands on. He reads both sides of an issue. When he emerges from his study, he knows the history of the problem, the political and social dimensions the various arguments and questions for the modern Christian to ponder.

He does not attempt a major moral problem every week. In fact, his practice has been to immerse himself in one major problem for a period of time. In the early sixties it was civil rights. In the late sixties to early seventies it was Vietnam. In the late seventies it was hunger and American intervention in places like El Salvador. In the eighties it has been the arms race...At Yale and at Riverside his practice has been to do his homework and make his statement clearly and early to the congregation only once, and not badger them with it week after week. Most of the time he preaches the lectionary and deals with pastoral issues.¹⁰

My own study of Coffin's sermons reinforces the truth of Carl's statements. Though some of Coffin's critics at Riverside Church accused him of preaching on only one theme during the 1980s and early '90s— namely, nuclear disarmament—his sermons do not bear that out. They are varied and often highly pastoral and, as Carl notes, ordinarily lectionary based. I also find it interesting that Coffin's most famous sermon, "Alex's Death," preached only two weeks after his own twenty-four-year-old son was tragically killed in an automobile accident, deals with that most personally existential of all issues: death.

But when Coffin does preach on a social issue, it is clear that he has done his homework, and done it well. And that if you are going to argue with him, you had better do your homework equally well before attempting it!

Helping People Stand in Another Person's Shoes and See the World from a Different Perspective

Barbara Lundblad, Professor of Preaching at Union Seminary in NYC, begins one of her sermons— based on the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke's Gospel, and preached to an ecumenical group of pastors—by telling about a pastor friend of hers who, while ministering to a very poor community in Detroit, asked a group of mothers one day what they would do if they won the lottery.

"What would I do if I won the lottery?" one woman said. "I'd buy easy chairs for the Laundromat—enough chairs so everybody could sit down and take a load off. All they've got is three old chairs, and two have broken seats—and the one that's not broken is so hard you'd rather sit on a dryer and burn your—you know what I mean, Pastor."¹¹

The pastor went on to press the point, asking the woman if there weren't anything else she'd want to do with the money, she held firm. No, she said. Just chairs for the Laundromat.

Lundblad uses this story to open up—in a very personal way—the reality of the gap between the rich and the poor in this land, and the fact that while some in our country are purchasing expensive watches at Cartier, many of the poor in our land really desire only to have basic needs met,

and those often on behalf of someone else. She ultimately uses her sermon to encourage preachers to challenge the language often heard in the public arena, which portrays the poor as lazy, lacking in motivation, having too many illegitimate children and cheating the government, and that urges the adoption of policies that will only further widen the chasm.

"Those of us who claim to speak in Christ's name," she concludes, "are called to share his vision....If we speak in the name of Jesus we must see Lazarus and love him, love him back to life again. We hardly know where to begin to close the chasm between the rich and the poor on this side of heaven. We could begin by talking to the women in the Laundromat, and by listening—really listening—to the One who has risen from the dead." 12

Taking the Long View

Finally, I want to talk about taking the wisdom of taking the long view in prophetic preaching.

In my early years of ministry I tended to think that change in people's lives and in the life of a congregation happened either immediately or not at all. And so, if I preached a few prophetic sermons and nothing much happened, I considered my people to be recalcitrant and myself to be a faithful, if ineffective, change agent.

Over time, though, I have come to realize that for most of us change happens slowly, imperceptibly, and over the space of years. And that genuine transformation in preaching often follows a similar trajectory.

I once heard someone say of the pastor of his congregation that one of the things he most admired about him was his patience with his flock, and the way in which his overall preaching reflected a long-term strategy for transformation, rather than an episodic or immediate one.

"Here's the pattern I've observed," he said. "For three weeks out of the month, my pastor will preach sermons the congregation has pretty much come to expect from him. Sermons that are full of grace and love and encouragement and pastoral care. But about every fourth week, there will be this sermon with a zinger in the middle of it that really stretches our edges and challenges us in some area. And because they come as a part of the whole package, our people are usually very open to hearing them.

"I've seen this happen so many times over the years," he continued, "that I have to believe this strategy is very intentional on our pastor's part. He knows we need to hear those stretching sermons that challenge us to take the next step in our journey of faith. But he also knows we'll hear them better if they are enshrouded in the midst of sermons that offer us lots of love and grace."

One of the phenomena I have observed through the years is that for whatever reason, people tend to hear prophetic sermons louder than others. You can preach ten pastoral sermons and one prophetic sermon, and the sermon that will be heard the loudest is the prophetic one.

Frankly, I think we need to acknowledge this reality and plan our preaching accordingly. The balance of our preaching is not measured in terms of how many sermons we may have preached on this or that issue. The balance is often measured by how people hear us. And in prophetic ministry, as well as in all forms of ministry, there is good biblical and theological rationale for erring on the side of grace. After all, that is what God in Christ has consistently done with us.

by Frank Brown

the reverend bliss williams browne

The Reverend bliss Williams browne is a woman of firsts. back in 1969, she was among the first women to enroll at Yale. In 1979, two years after a pioneering ordination into the Episcopal Church as a woman, a banking job took her to London and she became the first female priest to preach in that city's hallowed Westminster Abbey. Nowadays, the 56-year-old mother of three spends ten months of each year overseas, being the first to introduce her novel concept of "Imagine" to dozens of countries.

Notes

1. 1 Some years ago I heard Thomas G. Long say at an evangelism conference that he thought the church of that day had developed kerygmatic laryngitis. It is his term I am playing off of here, when I speak of prophetic laryngitis.
2. 2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 13.
3. 3 *Ibid.*, 60.
4. 4 Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), ed. Robert C. Kimball, 213.
5. 5 Philip Wogaman, *Speaking Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 19.
6. 6 *Ibid.*, 21.
7. 7 James A. Forbes, Jr., Sermon preached on videotape. As quoted in Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 53-54.

"I love going into pioneering situations and making them work. I'm so attracted to the edge, in between the future and the present," says browne, going on to explain how she discerns the "edge." "I think you listen and watch. One of my favorite words is prolepsis – something that is happening in the present but belongs to the future."

browne's ability to find the edge and, more significantly, to encourage others to do the same, has defined her life since 1992. That's when she founded Imagine Chicago, an organization that started by bringing young adults and local community builders together to talk and launch projects. browne's model is now in place in cities across the world. She spends most of her time traveling abroad, planting Imagine initiatives. In Chicago, past programs included a training initiative to help local leaders develop community projects, an endeavor aimed at giving the city's public school teachers a sense of renewal and a literacy project for parents.

In many ways, browne's journey began at Yale, specifically with an encounter with William Sloane Coffin, who encouraged her to become a minister – at a time when the Episcopal Church didn't ordain women. It's something she talked about at a may 2006 memorial service for Coffin, when she recalled hearing him speak the previous year.

"I was very moved by what he said, and by realizing how very much his words and witness had shaped my own life and work in ways I had not realized. my life had been lived, personally and professionally ever since I left Yale, at the intersection of faith, imagination, and public life, but for some reason I had forgotten how much his legacy and witness had imprinted and given courage to my own. After I heard bill speak last year, I went and stood outside, on the very spot where he had stopped me that day my senior year and pointed me toward God's future as the one demanding my attention. I took stock of the ways my life had been marked by his witness and presence."

It wasn't easy moving in the direction of God's future, as browne recounts with a degree of relish. upon moving to London and taking up her post there at the first National bank of Chicago, she was greeted with letters from three top Anglican clerics, who had somehow gotten word of the female priest's arrival. Each letter, according to browne, delivered the same general message: "We know you're here. behave yourself." She did, more or less, and returned to Chicago to continue banking and begin serving in first a local parish and later the cathedral. browne worked under supportive senior clergy but, in

8. 8 Walter Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text and the People," *Theology Today* 47 (October 1990): 237-47. some cases, the laity was much less so. "There was discrimination," she recalls, "having someone come up to you at coffee hour and say, 'Why do you want to ruin our church? What are you trying to prove?'"
9. 9 Brian K. Blount, "Stay Close," a sermon in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 179-80. As she grows older, Browne talks of how a "conversation with God" that she's kept up since she was a child is moving beyond being an "inside conversation that made me bigger than
10. 10 William J. Carl III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 122. who I am." Now, she increasingly centers on the external, "on the still point of the turning world, where the dance is."
11. 11 Barbara K. Lundblad, "An Easy Chair at the Laundromat," in *Transforming the Stone*, 113-19.
12. 12 Ibid., 118.

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